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ABSTRACT

Three central components of the Montessori method are described and shown to be reflected in the National Association for the Education of Young Children's (NAEYC) guidelines for developmentally appropriate curricula. NAEYC guideline 1C states, "Teachers prepare the environment for children to learn through active exploration and interaction with adults, other children, and materials"; this is a statement of a basic Montessori principle. A second Montessori principle concerning "sensitive periods" is reflected in the entire body of the NAEYC guidelines. A third principle common to both Montessori practice and the NAEYC guidelines is the idea of the teacher as an observer. It is concluded that, if early childhood educators intend to follow the NAEYC guidelines, they will be behaving very much like Montessori teachers. (RH)

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RESPONSES TO GUIDELINES FOR DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE PRACTICE FOR YOUNG CHILDREN AND MONTESSORI

NAEYC SYMPOSIUM ON DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE CURRICULUM FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

Patty Calvert, Ed.D.

Friday, November 14, 1986
7:00 to 9:00 P.M., Washington Sheraton

It's a wonderful privilege and honor to participate in this symposium today.

I'm sure you'll all be happy and relieved to hear that I gave my speech notes to Lillian Katz yesterday and told her to edit out anything she could not agree with. [PAUSE] So in conclusion, ...

My first responsibility (and pleasure) here today is to carry the congratulations of the American Montessori Society community to NAEYC on the excellence of their position statement on developmentally appropriate curriculum for young children.

Not only do the guidelines reflect a compatible amalgam of philosophies and practices of the outstanding early childhood theorists of this century, but those guidelines by and large reflect what I'm going to call a pure Montessori approach to helping children "learn how to learn."

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I hope that doesn't confuse you. [PAUSE] I hope that doesn't infuriate you. [PAUSE]

I imagine it does surprise some of you. But you must be aware that in the 81 years of Montessori history, the practice of Montessori varies widely among all cultures of the world.

I would like to describe briefly three of the most vital components of the Montessori method and show how clearly they are reflected in the work by the very distinguished authors of the scholarly NAEYC guidelines.

Number One. As you know, Montessori was a pioneer in the concept of the "prepared environment"--an environment where aesthetics are valued; where movement and spontaneous activities are encouraged; where a child can direct his own life-in-process as dictated by his interest, skill and desire; where every facet of the environment is scaled to the child's size and capabilities; and, most of all, where order prevails so that a child is insured the safety, security and predictability which must be present for a child to develop autonomy and a sense of self.

We all know that children today lead much less orderly lives than in the past. For some, their nursery, day-care or school environment provides a true balance in their chaotic world. Many of today's children are very much like those children in the slums of Rome where the first Montes-

sori school started. It was no accident that she called it Casa dei Bambini, the Children's House--". . . an environment," she said, "which is offered to the child that he may be given the opportunity of developing all of his activities . . . ." (1)

[(1) DR. MONTESSORI'S OWN HANDBOOK, PAGE 37.]

The most striking characteristic of any children's house is its accessibility to children. It should be a bright and cheerful place, with everything child-size and with open shelves. An atmosphere of respect should permeat the room, and the children should be able to choose what project they want to work on, for how long and with whom.

Montessori went on to say, "This environment which is serene and peaceful will foster self-discipline in the child." Thus, when NAEYC guideline 1C says, "Teachers prepare the environment for children to learn through active exploration and interaction with adults, other children and materials," that guideline is stating a basic Montessori principle. And Montessori teacher preparation programs emphasize skills in classroom design and environmental preparation and management techniques which allow children to be free to operate within that prepared environment--as Montessori says, "TO ALLOW THE LIBERTY OF PUPILS IN THEIR SPONTANEOUS MANIFESTATIONS." (2)

[(2) MONTESSORI METHOD, PAGE 80.]

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A second principle reflected in these guidelines is closely aligned to the Montessori concept of "sensitive periods." Through years of observing children, Montessori concluded that children are disposed to certain kinds of learning at certain stages of development. She said, "It seems that at certain periods in life there exist possibilities of making acquisitions which are no longer possible at other ages." (3)

[(3) DISCOVERY OF THE CHILD, PAGE 220.]

Sensitive periods are blocks of time in a child's life when he is absorbed with one characteristic of his environment to the exclusion of all others. Sensitive periods appear in an individual child as an intense interest for repeating certain actions at length for no obvious reason. And Montessori came to postulate that educational systems which ignore these powerful periods of readiness to learn are squandering the opportunity to unleash the potential within each child.

In some ways, that principle runs throughout the entire body of the NAEYC guidelines, since the emphasis continually is to plan appropriately for the age span within a group and to implement plans with attention to the different needs, interests and developmental levels of individuals.

Montessori invented materials prepared to awaken the child's interest at the cutting edge of his perceptual,

sensorimotor, social, emotional and intellectual development. They are not accidentally arranged in the classroom, nor are they to be slavishly presented. They are simply, as all good materials, sequential and self-correcting and, as the NAEYC guidelines suggest, ". . . provide opportunities for children to choose . . . and for adults to extend the child's learning."

Some of the sensitive periods Montessori recognized were these: an optimum period for interest in order and predictability is 18 months to 2 1/2; for language acquisition, 0 to 2 years--the period when children can learn at least two languages without an accent; for challenge in large motor movement, 4 years--when children climb upon ledges and walls, run up little hills and fly off the monkey bars.

Children have an affinity for writing and becoming literate at a very early age, Vygotsky says. So did Montessori.

In the newest edition of the Early Childhood Research Quarterly, there is an interesting study by Ada Anbar which addresses how children might acquire reading skills without direct instruction as early as 2 years 9 months.

The conclusions of that study seem to portray very well what Montessori described in her writings as the absorbent mind of the young child, who acquires information with no

apparent effort from his environment. It would be as wrong to exclude from the child's early environment materials which will fulfill his sensitive period toward literacy as it would be to teach reading and writing in a directed way, using inappropriate materials and activities and pressure tactics. Listen to this description of Miller Jackson, whom I observed last Thursday in her attempts to become literate.

There were 32 Montessori children ages 3, 4 and 5 working in a classroom. A parent had come to observe to see about placing her child in our class. We sat in little chairs in the classroom and watched as children were free to interact and choose their own work.

Miller Jackson, 3 1/2, in her second year in a Montessori class, approached Kim Doane, the lead teacher. She said, "I would like to make Miller."

Kim said, "I beg your pardon."

Miller said, "I want to make my name."

Kim said, "How would you like to do that, Miller?"

Miller said, "The movable alphabet."

Kim said, "Fine."

Off Miller skipped. Kim directed her attention to another child on a rug and began to give another lesson. Miller Jackson went to the rug rack, put a little rug out on the floor, smoothed it with her hands and then went to Ms. Doane and stood quietly beside her while Kim finished her

interaction with another child. Then Miller said, "What do I need to do now?"

Kim said, "Well, what sounds do you hear when I say Miller?"

Miller said, "M-m-m."

"Yes. Do you know what M-m-mm looks like?"

Miller said, "Yes."

Kim said, "Well, you can get that."

Off Miller skipped. She rounded two rows of shelving, stopping to chat with Sarah on her way. She came to the shelf where the movable alphabet was open and, using her little finger, began to look from section to section in the large movable alphabet box with 26 sections for what she heard as M-m-m. She found it. She picked it up with two fingers, dangled it from arms-length while she went back to find Ms. Doane, who was now far removed from the rug that Miller had spread so carefully. She said, "Ms. Doane, I found M-m-m."

Ms. Doan said, "Fine, Miller. Let's listen to your name again. M-i-i . . . M-i-i . . . . Can you find it?"

"Yes." Miller again rounded two rows of shelving, walking nicely, skipping a little here and there, and found the movable alphabet again.

The visitor and I were standing aside, and I said to that visitor, "Do you see that? The child is free to move.

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She has direction in her movement. She has purpose about her work--she is trying to become literate." We watched Miller.

Miller looked up at us, saw us observing and she said, "Is this 'i-i-i' or is this 'i-i-i'?" pointing to the I and the E.

I said, "This is i. It has a little dot."

She was trying to distinguish between I and E, an uncertainty for our little 3 1/2 year old. She gathered the I in two hands, the little dot in two fingers of the left hand, the longer part of I in the right hand, and she skipped back to her rug and continued her work, placing the I beside the M.

Montessori said the child achieves the extraordinary aim of personal integration: the harmony of her mind, her muscles and her will as a result of her interest and her ability to concentrate and to move. [PAUSE] Miller just integrated her mind, her will and her movement in her attempts to be literate. [PAUSE] And she did it in passing. [PAUSE] And she loved it.

Finally, we come to the idea of teacher as observer. If I were asked to show how Montessori teachers differ from others, I would say it has to do with their style of interaction with children. It's not only <u>what</u> Montessorians do, but the way they do it.

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Montessori was a physician trained in the skill of observation. She approached her work as a scientific experimenter to find out by observation how to meet children's needs to develop themselves and become autonomous. She discovered they were irritated by interruptions and disorder, that they preferred to engage in purposeful tasks rather than to play with toys and that they had an amazing concentration for very long periods of time, when interest was inherent in their activities.

We are all observers of children.

It is just that the Montessori teacher sees his role as assisting the child in her self-construction or recognizing that what is logical for the adult is not always logical for the child--that process counts, not product, and that the teacher is mainly a resource person for the child.

Montessori said, "We wish to awaken in the mind and the heart of the teacher an interest in natural phenomena to such an extent that loving nature, she shall develop the anxious and the expectant attitude of one who has prepared an experiement and who awaits the revelation from it." (4)

[(4) MONTESSORI METHOD, PAGE 9.]

Do you think you behave like a Montessorian in your classroom? I bet you do. At least if you intend to follow the NAEYC guidelines, you will be behaving very much like a Montessori teacher.

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Last week I sat in on a Montessori classroom observing again with a prospective parent. One of the children, Tim, age 3, joined us with his little chair and sat in it quietly. I asked Tim, "What are you doing?"

."I am observing, of course. Just like all the teachers do."

I've just told a cute little story, but why would I tell you that? The point is the teacher is an observer. Even the children are aware of that.

I will close by saying that we are especially pleased to see emphasis in the guidelines on learning materials and activities being concrete, real and relevant to the lives of young children; attention paid to the child's need for uninterrupted periods of time to become involved and investigate and persist; and for the many fine suggestions for adults to increase their sensitivities to the needs of the individual child.

Now it is true that we Montessorians like to use the word "WORK" when we talk about what our children are doing. That seems to annoy a lot of people. By work, Montessori does not mean lonely, mechanical drudgery. Work means to Montessori the physical and mental activity freely chosen by the child--activity which has meaning for him because it promotes his own growth or contributes to the world around him.

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Montessori said the greatest work of the child is to become a MAN.

Let's not quibble over words. Let's not waste time on the specialness of our differences. I think we have a vehicle here in these guidelines which should enable all of us to provide the most nurturing environment possible for the young child. These guidelines can help in our major task--as Montessori put it, "TO STIMULATE LIFE, LEAVING IT THEN FREE TO DEVELOP, TO UNFOLD. HEREIN LIES THE FIRST TASK OF THE EDUCATOR." (5)

[(5) MARIE MONTESSORI, PAGE 115.]

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